

# ***Shakespeare, Einstein, and the Bottom Line: The Marketing of Higher Education***

**David L. Kirp. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003.**

Reviewed by Melody Flowers

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Every few years sees a new cycle of books bemoaning the current state of higher education and its imminent destruction—most recently due to the insidious nature of filthy lucre and/or technology run amuck—in relationship to the Western ideal of a classical liberal arts education. Recent examples include Derek Bok’s *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education*, Bill Readings’ *The University in Ruins*, and David Noble’s *Digital Diploma Mills: The Automation of Higher Education*.

There is, of course, nothing inherently wrong with mulling over the pros and cons concerning the evolution of institutions of higher education. This forces us all to (re)consider baseline notions of “education” itself and, more particularly, the role of money, technology, what it means to become “better,” the relative prestige (and function) of a school’s “brand,” public versus proprietary schools, and the relationship of faculty to the schools in which they work. Too often, though, tomes examining these issues undercut their positions by using an angry/nostalgic/dogmatic tone that contrasts today’s “woes” to some utopian past for colleges and universities.

Thankfully, as an antidote to these bitter pills, comes David L. Kirp’s *Shakespeare, Einstein, and the Bottom Line: The Marketing of Higher Education*. Kirp, Professor of Public Policy at the University of California at Berkley, uses a decidedly nonjudgmental tone in twelve case studies examining schools ranging from the University of Chicago to Devry University. Dividing his case studies into four sections—The Higher Education Bazaar, Management 101, Virtual Worlds, and The Smart Money—he takes a close look at the specific ways in which schools are attempting to improve their public images, employ different management styles, focus on revenue generation, and best utilize online education. But, as he emphasizes in the introduction, “It is important not romanticize academe, not to slip into nostalgia for a time that really never was. Dollars have always greased the wheels of American higher education . . .”

An early chapter, “Nietzsche’s Niche,” examines how the University of Chicago, the school described famously by Alfred North Whitehead as being the place that is “most like ancient Athens,” battled in the 1990s with maintaining its high—some would

say excessively high—standards of education while at the same time increasing both its enrollment and historically small endowment. (This dilemma is, of course, the crux of many of the transformation discussions facing higher education today: what is the “soul” of an institution and what are the best means to sustain it in the face of real-world economic pressures?) The University of Chicago sought to balance these concerns in 1993 by bringing in Hugo Sonnenschein, an economist and provost from Princeton, to

raise money, cut costs, and increase enrollment by, among other means, revamping the undergraduate curriculum.

As Kirp notes, though, Sonnenschein almost immediately he ran into a “buzz saw”: the old guard at the school who saw many of these efforts as making the University of Chicago into an distastefully warm and fuzzy place—after all, students there proudly wear shirts describing the school as “the place where fun came to die”—at the expense of the rigorous education it traditionally provided. The long-term effect of this battle was twofold: on the one hand Sonnenschein’s tenure was marked by much personal and professional acrimony that led to his departure and, on the other hand, all of the significant changes he proposed were eventually adopted anyway.

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Later in the book, the chapter “Rebel Alliance” discusses how small classics departments throughout the South are using online education technology to create a collaborative “virtual” classics department that is stronger and more versatile than what any one of the participating schools could provide on its own. Although the role of classics departments doesn’t usually figure into institutional transformation discussions, the attitude of participating faculty at the various schools involved in the Sunoikisis project—named after an ancient alliance among the cities of Lesbos during an attempted revolt against the Athenian empire—sounds much like the marketing strategies for programs at most schools; as classicist Kenny Morrell says, “The only way that we can grow as a discipline—the only way we can survive—is to create demand for our product. . . . The only way we are going to survive is to get students into our classrooms. The only way that we can create a stimulating and inviting and provocative world of study for the students is collectively.”

Of course, not everyone sees the injection of online technology as a plus. As David Noble writes in *Digital Diploma Mills*, “The new technology of education . . . like the automation of other industries, robs faculty of their knowledge and skills, their control of their working lives, the product of their labor, and ultimately, their means of livelihood.” Then again, a project like Sunoikisis, as Kirp points out, is more of an attempt at social-venture capitalism as opposed to being a primarily revenue-generating project. He writes, “This idea relies on the willingness and ability of classics faculty to see themselves as part of a larger whole, one that transcends their individual

institution—a Virtual Department of Classics.”

The following chapter, “The Market in Ideas,” contrasts the radically different approaches—revenue generation versus social-venture capitalism—taken to online education employed by Columbia University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Kirp writes, “Columbia University and MIT both attempted to position themselves as first movers, but the two schools chose very different paths: Columbia sought to become a leading player in the e-learning bazaar, while MIT opted to put its course materials online for free.” The outcomes were starkly different. After investing 40 million dollars while generating only seven hundred thousand dollars in revenue, Columbia University abandoned its online venture whereas MIT’s placement of curriculum materials online is going strong and becoming increasingly popular with academics around the world. The difference? Columbia failed to realize, among other things, that the cachet of a school’s brand was lessened in the online arena when students were never physically at a campus whereas MIT’s approach recreated “in the virtual world the idea of an intellectual

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commons” with enormous social capital being generated for the school as a result. (Another problem for Columbia, as Kirp sees it, is that they thought the economies of scale of e-commerce would make online classes more profitable—and ultimately render conventional schools obsolete—by delivering instruction at lower prices.) In the arena of high technology merging with instructional delivery, being a “first mover” isn’t the boon it might be. As Kirp quotes William Bowen of Mellon Foundation, “New ideas . . . germinate over long periods and almost always take longer to correct than they did to create.” MIT now has the time to take their online model in a variety of different directions; Columbia set up a situation for itself where it never had the chance to do that.

Finally, in Chapter 13, “They’re All Business,” we are shown how proprietary schools such as Devry University are changing the face of technical higher education and, indeed, making us all rethink and redefine the nature of “education” itself. That is, what is the purpose of an education? Is it, as Kirp asks, primarily to traffic in ideas or know how? In broad terms, to those at the University of Chicago it has to do with developing the mind for the sake of developing the mind and/or for the production of new knowledge. In the case of Devry, it has to do with teaching practical skill sets that lead at the very least to a job—Devry boasts a 95% placement rate for graduates—and at best to a career. The real definition, however, as to the relative uses and/or merits of different roles for education has to do more with the perceptions of students and employers than with how schools necessarily see themselves. That is, students decide what kind of education they want to receive, employers decide what kind of training

they want their employees to have, and it is many of the new breed of proprietary (technical) schools that have responded most nimbly to the shift in demographics in terms of wants and needs by these two groups.

In the end, as Kirp concludes, “For better or worse—for better *and* worse—American higher education is being transformed by both the power and the ethic of the marketplace.” At the same time, it can be heartening to remember that this is not a debate unique to our time. After all, in 1828 Yale College created a committee to look into dropping the study of dead languages to pay more attention to “practical” arts. In Yale’s case, for a brief the moment at that time, the course of study at Yale stayed as it was, but it goes to show that the tension of defining the purpose of education as either being liberal-arts based—primarily forming the mind to understand and view the world in certain ways—or more specifically skills based—learning a skill to practice a specific trade—has been with (and will likely remain with) us for a long time. The time for the most amount of worry will come if/when this debate ceases to take place. And, Kirp’s book is an excellent and highly readable place to see the current state of this conversation.

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